

PROPAGANDA: WHO'S PLAYING WITH YOUR MIND?

Propaganda can be as blatant as a swastika or as subtle as a joke. Its persuasive techniques are regularly applied by politicians, advertisers, journalists, radio personalities, and others who are interested in influencing human behavior. Propagandistic messages can be used to accomplish positive social ends, as in campaigns to reduce drunk driving, but they are also used to win elections and to sell malt liquor.

"Every day we are bombarded with one persuasive communication after another. These appeals persuade not through the give-and-take of argument and debate, but through the manipulation of symbols and of our most basic human emotions. For better or worse, ours is an age of propaganda." (Pratkanis and Aronson, 1991).

With the growth of communication tools like the Internet, the flow of persuasive messages has been dramatically accelerated. For the first time ever, citizens around the world are participating in uncensored conversations about their collective future. This is a wonderful development, but there is a cost.

The information revolution has led to information overload, and people are confronted with hundreds of messages each day. Although few studies have looked at this topic, it seems fair to suggest that many people respond to this pressure by processing messages more quickly and, when possible, by taking mental short-cuts.

Propagandists love short-cuts-particularly those which short-circuit rational thought. They encourage this by agitating emotions, by exploiting insecurities, by capitalizing on the ambiguity of language, and by bending the rules of logic. As history shows, they can be quite successful.

Propaganda analysis exposes the tricks that propagandists use and suggests ways of resisting the short-cuts that they promote. This article discusses various propaganda techniques, provides contemporary examples of their use, and proposes strategies of mental self-defense. Propaganda analysis is an antidote to the excesses of the Information Age.

This article is inspired by the pioneering work of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA). The IPA is best-known for identifying the seven basic propaganda devices: Name-Calling, Glittering Generality, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon. According to the authors of a recent book on propaganda, "these seven devices... have become virtually synonymous with the practice and analysis of propaganda in all of its aspects." (Combs and Nimmo, 1993)

In their book, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, the IPA stated that "It is essential in a democratic society that young people and adults learn how to think, learn how to make up their minds. They must learn how to think independently, and they must learn how to think together. They must come to conclusions, but at the same time they must recognize the right of other men to come to opposite conclusions. So far as individuals are concerned, the art of democracy is the art of thinking and discussing independently together."

Common Propaganda Techniques

Word Games: *Name Calling*

The name-calling technique links a person, or idea, to a negative symbol. The propagandist who uses this technique hopes that the audience will reject the person or the idea on the basis of the negative symbol, instead of looking at the available evidence.

"Bad names have played a tremendously powerful role in the history of the world and in our own individual development. They have ruined reputations, stirred men and women to outstanding accomplishments, sent others to prison cells, and made men mad enough to enter battle and slaughter their fellowmen. They have been and are applied to other people, groups, gangs, tribes, colleges, political parties, neighborhoods, states, sections of the country, nations, and races." (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938)

The most obvious type of name calling involves bad names. For example, consider the following: Commie; Fascist; Pig; Yuppie; Bum; Queer; Terrorist.

A more subtle form of name-calling involves words or phrases that are selected because they possess a negative emotional charge. Those who oppose budget cuts may characterize fiscally conservative politicians as "stingy." Supporters might prefer to describe them as "thrifty." Both words refer to the same behavior, but they have very different connotations. Other examples of negatively charged words include: social engineering; radical; cowardly; counter-culture.

According to the IPA, we should ask ourselves the following questions when we spot an example of name-calling.

- What does the name mean?
- Does the idea in question have a legitimate connection with the real meaning of the name?
- Is an idea that serves my best interests being dismissed through giving it a name I don't like?
- Leaving the name out of consideration, what are the merits of the idea itself?

Word Games: *Glittering Generalities*

We believe in, fight for, live by virtue words about which we have deep-set ideas. Such words include civilization, Christianity, good, proper, right, democracy, patriotism, motherhood, fatherhood, science, medicine, health, and love.

For our purposes in propaganda analysis, we call these virtue words "Glittering Generalities" in order to focus attention upon this dangerous characteristic that they have: They mean different things to different people; they can be used in different ways.

This is not a criticism of these words as we understand them. Quite the contrary. It is a criticism of the uses to which propagandists put the cherished words and beliefs of unsuspecting people.

When someone talks to us about democracy, we immediately think of our own definite ideas about democracy, the ideas we learned at home, at school, and in church. Our first and natural reaction is to assume that the speaker is using the word in our sense, that he believes as we do on this important subject. This lowers our 'sales resistance' and makes us far less suspicious than we ought to be when the speaker begins telling us the things 'the United States must do to preserve democracy.'

The Glittering Generality is, in short, Name Calling in reverse. While Name Calling seeks to make us form a judgment to reject and condemn without examining the evidence, the Glittering Generality device seeks to make us approve and accept without examining the evidence. In acquainting ourselves with the Glittering Generality Device, therefore, all that has been said regarding Name Calling must be kept in mind..." (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938)

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis suggested a number of questions that people should ask themselves when confronted with this technique:

- What does the virtue word really mean?
- Does the idea in question have a legitimate connection with the real meaning of the word?
- Is an idea that does not serve my best interests being "sold" to me merely through its being given a name that I like?
- Leaving the virtue word out of consideration, what are the merits of the idea itself?

Word Games: *Euphemisms*

When propagandists use glittering generalities and name-calling symbols, they are attempting to arouse their audience with vivid, emotionally suggestive words. In certain situations, however, the propagandist attempts to pacify the audience in order to make an unpleasant reality more palatable. This is accomplished by using words that are bland and euphemistic.

Since war is particularly unpleasant, military discourse is full of euphemisms. In the 1940's, America changed the name of the War Department to the Department of Defense. Under the Reagan Administration, the MX-Missile was renamed "The Peacekeeper." During war-time, civilian casualties are referred to as "collateral damage," and the word "liquidation" is used as a synonym for "murder."

The comedian George Carlin notes that, in the wake of the first world war, traumatized veterans were said to be suffering from "shell shock." The short, vivid phrase conveys the horrors of battle-one can practically hear the shells exploding overhead. After the second world war, people began to use the term "combat fatigue" to characterize the same condition. The phrase is a bit more pleasant, but it still acknowledges combat as the source of discomfort. In the wake of the Vietnam War, people referred to "post-traumatic stress disorder": a phrase that is completely disconnected from the reality of war altogether.

False Connections: *Transfer*

Transfer is a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept. For example, most of us respect and revere our church and our nation. If the propagandist succeeds in getting church or nation to approve a campaign in behalf of some program, he thereby transfers its authority, sanction, and prestige to that program. Thus, we may accept something which otherwise we might reject.

In the Transfer device, symbols are constantly used. The cross represents the Christian Church. The flag represents the nation. Cartoons like Uncle Sam represent a consensus of public opinion. Those symbols stir emotions. At their very sight, with the speed of light, is aroused the whole complex of feelings we have with respect to church or nation. A cartoonist, by having Uncle Sam disapprove a budget for unemployment relief, would have us feel that the whole United States disapproves relief costs. By drawing an Uncle Sam who approves the same budget, the cartoonist

would have us feel that the American people approve it. Thus, the Transfer device is used both for and against causes and ideas." (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938)

When a political activist closes her speech with a public prayer, she is attempting to transfer religious prestige to the ideas that she is advocating. As with all propaganda devices, the use of this technique is not limited to one side of the political spectrum. It can be found in the speeches of liberation theologians on the left, and in the sermons of religious activists on the right.

In a similar fashion, propagandists may attempt to transfer the reputation of "Science" or "Medicine" to a particular project or set of beliefs. A slogan for a popular cough drop encourages audiences to "Visit the halls of medicine." On TV commercials, actors in white lab coats tell us that the "Brand X is the most important pain reliever that can be bought without a prescription." In both of these examples, the transfer technique is at work.

These techniques can also take a more ominous turn. As Alfred Lee has argued, "even the most flagrantly anti-scientific racists are wont to dress up their arguments at times with terms and carefully selected illustrations drawn from scientific works and presented out of all accurate context." The propaganda of Nazi Germany, for example, rationalized racist policies by appealing to both science and religion.

This does not mean that religion and science have no place in discussions about social issues! The point is that an idea or program should not be accepted or rejected simply because it has been linked to a symbol such as Medicine, Science, Democracy, or Christianity. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis has argued that, when confronted with the transfer device, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

- In the most simple and concrete terms, what is the proposal of the speaker?
- What is the meaning of the the thing from which the propagandist is seeking to transfer authority, sanction, and prestige?
- Is there any legitimate connection between the proposal of the propagandist and the revered thing, person or institution?
- Leaving the propagandistic trick out of the picture, what are the merits of the proposal viewed alone?

False Connections: *Testimonial*

Tiger Woods is on the cereal box, promoting Wheaties as part of a balanced breakfast. Cher is endorsing a new line of cosmetics, and La Toya Jackson says that the Psychic Friends Network changed her life. The lead singer of R.E.M appears on a public service announcement and encourages fans to support the "Motor Voter Bill." The actor who played the bartender on *Cheers* is an outspoken environmentalist.

"This is the classic misuse of the Testimonial Device that comes to the minds of most of us when we hear the term. We recall it indulgently and tell ourselves how much more sophisticated we are than our grandparents or even our parents.

With our next breath, we begin a sentence, 'The Times said,' 'John L. Lewis said..., 'Herbert Hoover said...', 'The President said...', 'My doctor said...', 'Our minister said...!' Some of these Testimonials may merely give greater emphasis to a legitimate and accurate idea, a fair use of the device; others, however, may represent the sugar-coating of a distortion, a falsehood, a misunderstood notion, an anti-social suggestion..." (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938)

There is nothing wrong with citing a qualified source, and the testimonial technique can be used to construct a fair, well-balanced argument. However, it is often used in ways that are unfair and misleading.

The most common misuse of the testimonial involves citing individuals who are not qualified to make judgements about a particular issue. In 1992, Barbara Streisand supported Bill Clinton, and Arnold Schwarzenegger threw his weight behind George Bush. Both are popular performers, but there is no reason to think that they know what is best for this country.

Unfair testimonials are usually obvious, and most of us have probably seen through this rhetorical trick at some time or another. However, this probably happened when the testimonial was provided by a celebrity that we did not respect. When the testimony is provided by an admired celebrity, we are much less likely to be critical.

According to the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, we should ask ourselves the following questions when we encounter this device.

- Who or what is quoted in the testimonial?
- Why should we regard this person (or organization or publication) as having expert knowledge or trustworthy information on the subject in question?
- What does the idea amount to on its own merits, without the benefit of the Testimonial?

You may have noticed the presence of the testimonial technique in the previous paragraph, which began by citing the Insitute for Propaganda Analysis. In this case, the technique is justified. Or is it?

Special Appeals: *Plain Folks*

By using the plain-folks technique, speakers attempt to convince their audience that they, and their ideas, are "of the people." The device is used by advertisers and politicians alike.

America's recent presidents have all been millionaires, but they have gone to great lengths to present themselves as ordinary citizens. Bill Clinton ate at McDonald's and confessed a fondness for trashy spy novels. George Bush Sr. hated broccoli, and loved to fish. Ronald Reagan was often photographed chopping wood, and Jimmy Carter presented himself as a humble peanut farmer from Georgia.

We are all familiar with candidates who campaign as political outsiders, promising to "clean out the barn" and set things straight in Washington. The political landscape is dotted with politicians who challenge a mythical "cultural elite," presumably aligning themselves with "ordinary Americans."

As baby boomers approach their sixth decade, we are no longer shocked by the sight of politicians in denim who listen to rock and roll.

In all of these examples, the plain-folks device is at work.

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis has argued that, when confronted with this device, we should suspend judgement and ask ourselves the following questions:

- What are the propagandist's ideas worth when divorced from his or her personality?
- What could he or she be trying to cover up with the plain-folks approach?
- What are the facts?

Special Appeals: *Bandwagon*

The propagandist hires a hall, rents radio stations, fills a great stadium, marches a million or at least a lot of men in a parade. He employs symbols, colors, music, movement, all the dramatic arts. He gets us to write letters, to send telegrams, to contribute to his cause. He appeals to the desire, common to most of us, to follow the crowd. Because he wants us to follow the crowd in masses, he directs his appeal to groups held together already by common ties, ties of nationality, religion, race, sex, vocation. Thus propagandists campaigning for or against a program will appeal to us as Catholics, Protestants, or Jews...as farmers or as school teachers; as housewives or as miners.

With the aid of all the other propaganda devices, all of the artifices of flattery are used to harness the fears and hatreds, prejudices and biases, convictions and ideals common to a group. Thus is emotion made to push and pull us as members of a group onto a Band Wagon." (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938)

The basic theme of the Band Wagon appeal is that "everyone else is doing it, and so should you." Since few of us want to be left behind, this technique can be quite successful. However, as the IPA points out, "there is never quite as much of a rush to climb onto the Band Wagon as the propagandist tries to make us think there is."

When confronted with this technique, it may be helpful to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is this propagandist's program?
- What is the evidence for and against the program?
- Regardless of the fact that others are supporting this program, should I support it?
- Does the program serve or undermine my individual and collective interests?

Special Appeals: *Fear*

"The streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might, and the Republic is in danger. Yes - danger from within and without. We need law and order! Without it our nation cannot survive." - Adolf Hitler, 1932

When a propagandist warns members of her audience that disaster will result if they do not follow a particular course of action, she is using the fear appeal. By playing on the audience's deep-seated fears, practitioners of this technique hope to redirect attention away from the merits of a particular proposal and toward steps that can be taken to reduce the fear.

This technique can be highly effective when wielded by a fascist demagogue, but it is typically used in less dramatic ways. Consider the following:

- A television commercial portrays a terrible automobile accident (the fear appeal), and reminds viewers to wear their seat-belts (the fear-reducing behavior).
- A pamphlet from an insurance company includes pictures of houses destroyed by floods (the fear appeal), and follows up with details about home-owners' insurance (the fear-reducing behavior).
- A letter from a pro-gun organization begins by describing a lawless America in which only criminals own guns (the fear appeal), and concludes by asking readers to oppose a ban on automatic weapons (the fear-reducing behavior).

Since the end of the second world war, social psychologists and communication scholars have been conducting empirical studies in order to learn more about the effectiveness of fear appeals. Some have criticized the conceptualization of the studies, and others have found fault with the experimental methods, but the general conclusions are worth considering, if not accepting.

- "All other things being equal, the more frightened a person is by a communication, the more likely her or she is to take positive preventive action." (Pratkanis and Aronson, 1991)

- Fear appeals will not succeed in altering behavior if the audience feels powerless to change the situation.
- Fear appeals are more likely to succeed in changing behavior if they contain specific recommendations for reducing the threat that the audience believes are both effective and doable.

In summary, there are four elements to a successful fear appeal: 1) a threat, 2) a specific recommendation about how the audience should behave, 3) audience perception that the recommendation will be effective in addressing the threat, and 4) audience perception that they are capable of performing the recommended behavior.

When fear appeals do not include all four elements, they are likely to fail. Pratkanis and Aronson provide the example of the anti-nuclear movement, which successfully aroused public fear of nuclear war, but offered few specific recommendations that people perceived as effective or doable. By contrast, fall-out shelters were enormously popular during the 1950s because people believed that shelters would protect them from nuclear war, and installing a shelter was something that they could do.

In a similar fashion, during the 1964 campaign, Lyndon Johnson was said to have swayed many voters with a well-known television commercial that portrayed a young girl being annihilated in a nuclear blast. This commercial linked nuclear war to Barry Goldwater (Johnson's opponent), and proposed a vote for Johnson as an effective, doable way of avoiding the threat.

In contemporary politics, the fear-appeal continues to be widespread. When a politician agitates the public's fear of immigration, or crime, and proposes that voting for her will reduce the threat, she is using this technique. When confronted with persuasive messages that capitalize on our fear, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

- Is the speaker exaggerating the fear or threat in order to obtain my support?
- How legitimate is the fear that the speaker is provoking?
- Will performing the recommended action actually reduce the supposed threat?
- When viewed dispassionately, what are the merits of the speaker's proposal?

Logical Fallacies:

Bad Logic or Propaganda?

Logic is the process of drawing a conclusion from one or more premises. A statement of fact, by itself, is neither logical or illogical (although it can be true or false).

As an example of how logic can be abused, consider the following argument which has been widely propagated on the Internet.

- Premise 1: Hillary Clinton supports gun-control legislation.
- Premise 2: All fascist regimes of the twentieth century have passed gun-control legislation.
- Conclusion: Hillary Clinton is a fascist.

One way of testing the logic of an argument like this is to translate the basic terms and see if the conclusion still makes sense. As you can see, the premises may be correct, but the conclusion does not necessarily follow.

- Premise 1: All Christians believe in God.
- Premise 2: All Muslims believe in God.
- Conclusion: All Christians are Muslims.

This is a rather extreme example of how logic can be abused.

It should be noted that a message can be illogical without being propagandistic—we all make logical mistakes. The difference is that propagandists deliberately manipulate logic in order to promote their cause.

Logical

Fallacies:

Unwarranted Extrapolation

The tendency to make huge predictions about the future on the basis of a few small facts is a common logical fallacy.

As Stuart Chase points out, "it is easy to see the persuasiveness in this type of argument. By pushing one's case to the limit... one forces the opposition into a weaker position. The whole future is lined up against him. Driven to the defensive, he finds it hard to disprove something which has not yet happened.

Extrapolation is what scientists call such predictions, with the warning that they must be used with caution. A homely illustration is the driver who found three gas stations per mile along a stretch of the Montreal highway in Vermont, and concluded that there must be plenty of gas all the way to the North Pole. You chart two or three points, draw a curve through them, and extend it indefinitely."(Chase, 1952)

This logical sleight of hand often provides the basis for an effective fear-appeal. Consider the following contemporary examples:

- If Congress passes legislation limiting the availability of automatic weapons, America will slide down a slippery slope which will ultimately result in the banning of all guns, the destruction of the Constitution, and a totalitarian police state.
- If the United States approves NAFTA, the giant sucking sound that we hear will be the

sound of thousands of jobs and factories disappearing to Mexico.

- The introduction of communication tools such as the Internet will lead to a radical decentralization of government, greater political participation, and a rebirth of community.

When a communicator attempts to convince you that a particular action will lead to disaster or to utopia, it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

- Is there enough data to support the speaker's predictions about the future?
- Can I think of other ways that things might turn out?
 - If there are many different ways that things could turn out, why is the speaker painting such an extreme picture?

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